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The talismanic-religious nature of late Ottoman inscriptions in the Tihāmah cities

ROBERTA GIUNTA

Between 1992 and 1999 the Department of Asian Studies of the Naples Oriental Institute organized three surveys in Tihāmah — the coastal region of Yemen on the Red Sea — in order to reconstruct late Ottoman period urban organization in the main centres of the region by studying the historic buildings and their rich stucco and wood architectural decoration (Fontana *et al.* 1998). The survey was conducted both in the coastal centres of al-Luḥayyah, al-Ḥudaydah, al-Khūkhah and al-Mūkhah, and in the inland centres of Bayt al-Faqīh, Zabīd and Ḥays. During these three surveys — and in particular the last, carried out in March 1999 — we found a considerable number of unpublished inscriptions dating to the latter half of the 12th/18th century. Study of these texts is still in progress.

Almost all these inscriptions are located on the outside of private houses, many of which were the splendid residences of wealthy families until the early 20th century, though nowadays they are in a bad state of preservation.

The inscriptions are to be seen both on the wooden lintels of doors — which may be of a very simple type or more complex (Figs 1–2) — and within the often richly decorated small and large panels carved into the plaster above the doors or lintels (Fig. 3) or, more rarely, on the upper part of the façades (Fig. 4). All the inscriptions are in a simple style of cursive script, the vast majority displaying little elaboration. They were incised or carved in relief on a plain background devoid of decoration.

These inscriptions reveal a particularly marked talismanic-religious nature, offering further evidence of the persistence and enormous popularity of beliefs and superstitions, and the need for protection against the presence of jinn and other supernatural beings able to work their way into dwellings and bring about misfortunes and diseases.

In terms of content, the texts can be grouped into the following four categories:

1. Quranic inscriptions
2. Religious inscriptions

3. Well-wishing inscriptions

4. Inscriptions with signs and symbols.

The texts belonging to the first two categories are usually introduced by the *basmalah*. All the Quranic inscriptions are hymns to the glory, omnipresence and omnipotence of God, whose qualities as Protector and Guardian, Fount of Mercy, and Supreme Guidance receive the greatest emphasis.

Almost all the inscriptions on the wooden lintels and some of those carved into the lower part of the stucco panels contain a single verse, in some cases incomplete, while the texts enclosed within great shields and stucco panels above or beside the main door — usually later than the previous type — almost always exhibit a sequence of verses from various suras.

The use of Quranic verses in magic derives from the belief that diseases are usually the result of actions by superhuman powers, against which men alone have no defence. Every sura of the Qurʾān is thought to possess magical virtues, but some have always been credited with greater protective and curative powers than others (Canaan 1936: 84; Canaan 1937: 73; Rivière 1994: 115–116). Without exception, the Quranic verses in the inscriptions of Tihāmah also appear on various types of amulets and talismans. Some verses are associated with belief in protection against the evil eye, others serve as charms and exorcisms, while yet others are held to be highly effective against evil-doers and spells. Such, for example, is the case of *sūrat al-fātiḥah*, the Throne verse, verse 173 of sura 3 ('God suffices me, and for me is a good protector', widely used in the inscriptions of al-Ḥudaydah), verse 13 of sura 61 ('Mighty help of God and speedy triumph!', widely used in the inscriptions of Bayt al-Faqīh), and the closing three suras of the Qurʾān. In some inscriptions we also find pairs of 'isolated letters', apparently devoid of meaning, which seem to hide a particular mystical value.

The inscriptions of a religious nature may either consist of the *basmalah* alone, often enclosed within a circular

medallion incised on the upper part of the wooden lintel, or the *ṣahādah* (in the abbreviated form *lā ilāh illā ʿllāh*, or completed with *wa-muḥammad rasūl allāh*) executed on the wooden lintel or within a medallion carved into the stucco in the portal arch, or the *taṣliyyah* (generally in the form *ṣallā allāh ʿalā muḥammad al-nabī*),¹ or the name of Allāh alone or that of Muḥammad, or expressions such as *mā ṣāʾ allāh*, *ṣubḥān allāh*, *lā quwwah illā bi-ʿllāh*, or, to conclude the list, certain of *al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnāʾ* (the 99 Beautiful Names of God) often preceded by the vocative particle *yā*.

The well-wishing inscriptions almost always contain short, precise requests for well-being, prosperity, fortune and riches for the occupants of the building, sometimes characterized as *ḥaṣīn* 'invincible' (Fig. 5). In some cases, more simply, a combination can be seen of the well-wishing expression addressed to those crossing the threshold (*yā dāḥil al-bāb*) and the *taṣliyyah* (Fig. 6).

It is not unusual to find these three types of texts combined in one long inscription enclosed within one or more rectangular panels carved into the stucco above the main door, as attested in the Bayt al-Faqīh inscription dated 1297/1879 where, in the right-hand part, the *basmalah* introduces the date of construction and, in the central part, the *ṣahādah* is followed by a Quranic verse (3:173), good wishes for those crossing the threshold, the *taṣliyyah* and a second Quranic verse (9:129) (Fig. 7).

In Yemen, the inscriptions belonging to these first three categories find their closest parallels in the many coeval texts carved on private houses in Ṣanʿāʾ (Bonnenfant & Bonnenfant 1987; Bonnenfant P. 1995) and in inscriptions found in south-eastern Yemen, at al-Hajarayn, Shiḥr (Fig. 8), and Mukallā (Fig. 9).

We also find very similar Quranic inscriptions in Zanzibar, enclosed within circular medallions or small rectangular cartouches (Fig. 10) carved on the central part of the elaborate wooden lintels over the portals of a great number of 19th century private houses (Mwalim 1998).

The most interesting set of inscriptions consists of a type displaying signs and symbols. There are not a great many of these, but they add to the few so far known to us appearing on monuments. Of this set, we may consider in the first place the inscription carved on the door of one of the private houses at Ḥays (Fig. 11), consisting solely of a sequence of seven symbols which, with a few differences, recall the seven magic signs — seals of various prophets, generally known by the name of the 'seal of Solomon' — which have from time immemorial been credited with an extraordinary magical force and efficacious protective power. This seal is also known as *al-ism al-ʿaẓam* 'the

most high name', or as *sūrat al-ism al-ṣarīf*, 'the sign of the noble name'. It is used to represent the supreme name of God and almost invariably displays on the right the five-pointed star, held to be the seal impressed on Solomon's ring (Budge 1930: 40; Kriss & Kriss-Heinrich 1962: 74).² In the Ḥays inscription it is probable that the engraver miscopied the symbols, possibly because he was unacquainted with their original meaning. The same symbols — distributed over three lines — appear in their correct form this time in one of the more recent Bayt al-Faqīh inscriptions dated 1385/1965, where they occur at the end of the text, between a verse of the Qurʾān and the date of the construction of the house (Fig. 12). Only one comparable example has so far been found in Yemen, an inscription carved on the wooden lintel of a private house at al-Khuraybah in the Wādī Doʿan (Fig. 13) (Wöhrlin 1999: pl. 97).

A study by Sophie Blanchy and Moussa Said analyses a number of 'magico-religious' inscriptions found on mosques, tombs and private houses on the island of Ngazidja in the Comoro Islands, between the east coast of Africa and Madagascar. The elements of the formulas are much like those in the Yemeni inscriptions discussed here. Moreover, the seven signs on the seal of Solomon can also be seen on the Friday Mosque in the city of Moroni,³ on the entrance to the Idarus Palace at Ikoni, and on a tomb found at Bandamadji (Blanchy & Said 1990).

The same seal, we may recall, is attested on a great number of talismans and also reproduced on some talismanic bowls (Canaan 1936) such as those in the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto (Fig. 14) (Ittig 1982: pls II–III), in the collection of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (Rehatsek 1871–1874: 150),⁴ in the Naples Museum of Capodimonte (Scerrato 1967: 35–36, fig. 21), in the collections of the Duc de Sully and the Abbé de Tersan (Reinaud 1828, ii: 354), in the Arab Museum of Cairo (Wiet 1932: 95, pl. LXIII) and in the Aron Collection at Rome (unpublished).

Among the Tihāmah inscriptions with signs and symbols are three formed by magic squares (*awṣāq*, sg. *wifq*), two of which contain symbols and the third numbers. The first two are very similar and are carved in relief in the plaster on the upper part of two facing walls in the same room, in a private house at al-Luḥayyah, which is in a state of utter neglect (Fig. 15). However, the symbols forming them are totally unknown to us, and we have so far failed to find any parallels.

The third square, by contrast, is a typical *wifq* with nine compartments, each occupied by a two digit number. It is situated in the middle of a large, elaborate panel in stucco

sculpted on the upper part of the main entrance of a private house dated 1293/1876 in Bayt al-Faqīh (Fig. 16). The square is made up of numbers between 30 and 38. The sum of the numbers in the rows, columns and diagonals is always 102. This number does not correspond to the numerical value of any of *al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnāʾ*, or the names of the angels or archangels (as is traditional), but could (as is sometimes the case) be obtained from the sum of two of the 99 Beautiful Names. The meaning of the 6-digit number carved above this square is still to be investigated.

In the present state of research, we know of only a few other examples of magic squares used in architectural decoration, the most typical appearing on two buildings in Oman. Here, in fact, we have three *awfāq*, but formed by squares rotated through 45° containing both isolated letters and numbers. One is in the centre of the wooden lintel on the main door of the palace of al-Manṣūr, in the small town of Jammah, which is now in a state of utter neglect (Baldiṣsera 1993). The letters form the word *ḥafīẓ* ('the Guardian', one of the 99 Names of God), while the total of numbers always adds up to 66 (the numerical values of the word Allāh plus one of His 99 Names, *al-wakīl*) (Fig. 17). The other two are carved on the lintel of the portal of the fort called Bayt al-Falaj in the city of Muscat, which was until 1921 the residence of the sultans of Oman and was subsequently transformed into a museum (Oman 1991). Carved on either side of an inscription consisting of a sequence of letters arranged over three lines, one *wifq* is constructed from the Name *al-karīm* ('the Generous'), the other from the Name *al-wakīl* ('the Trustee'). Other examples of magic squares are also to be found in the previously mentioned magico-religious inscriptions of the Comoro Islands (Blanchy & Said 1990: 51–56).

Further evidence of the exchange between countries on the Red Sea and Indian Ocean of talismanic-religious traditions associated with entrances to buildings is also to be found in two particular types of ornament. One is a chain and the other is a particular type of wooden coping. The chain, attested on a private house at al-Ḥudaydah, is carved on the wooden frame of the lower part of the *rōṣān* ('dormer window'). Generally it is used to repel evil-spirits attempting to force their way into the dwelling. For this purpose it is carved on the exterior frames of a considerable number of doors in Zanzibar (Fig. 10) (Mwalim 1998).

The wooden coping consists of a succession of small pagan-looking abstract figures of distinctly African inspiration. This is found on the upper part of a certain number of doors in Ḥaḍramawt, and in particular in an area between Shibām and Seyūn⁵ (Fig. 18).

We hope that further investigations in the Ḥaḍramawt, Oman and on the east coast of Africa will furnish new architectural and artistic evidence for the contacts between these different areas with a particular focus on their talismanic-religious implications.

Notes

- ¹ The word *al-nabī* is almost always followed by the epithet *al-muḥtār*, 'the Elect'.
- ² It must be noted that the isolated five-pointed or six-pointed star is also attested in a great number of Tihāmah inscriptions where it is often used to fill gaps in the epigraphic field.
- ³ This mosque was built in 830/1427 but totally reconstructed in 1921.
- ⁴ This talismanic bowl was later reported missing from the collection (Ismail 1921–1923: 173).
- ⁵ The four doors of a small mausoleum found at al-Ghurfaḥ, for example, present four different types of wooden coping.

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FIGURE 2. *al-Hudaydah, private house, inscription on the wooden lintel* (1212/1797). Photograph M.V. Fontana, 1999 season.



FIGURE 1. *al-Hudaydah, private house, inscription on the wooden lintel* (1193/1778–1779). Photograph M.V. Fontana, 1997 season.

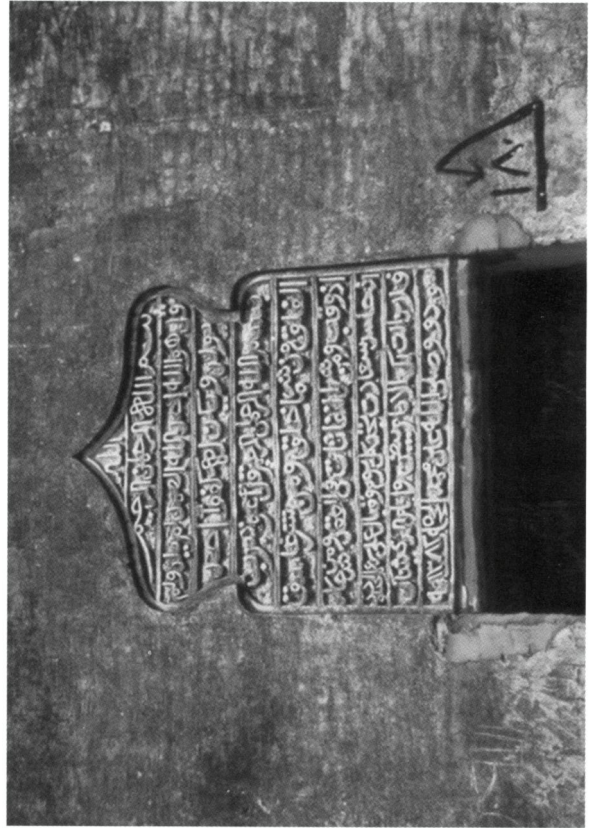


FIGURE 3. *Bayt al-Faqīh, private house, inscription above the main door* (1382/1963). Photograph M.V. Fontana, 1999 season.



FIGURE 5. *al-Luḥayyah, private house, inscription on the wooden lintel (1273/1856). Photograph M.V. Fontana, 1999 season.*

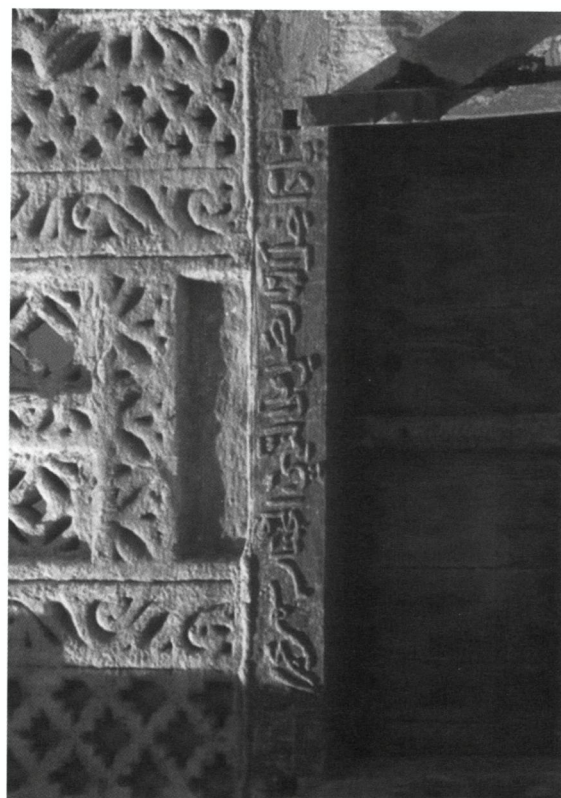


FIGURE 6. *al-Luḥayyah, private house, inscription on the wooden lintel (1261/1845). Photograph M.V. Fontana, 1999 season.*



FIGURE 4. *al-Ḥudaydah, private house, inscription on the upper part of the façade (1361/1942). Photograph M.V. Fontana, 1999 season.*

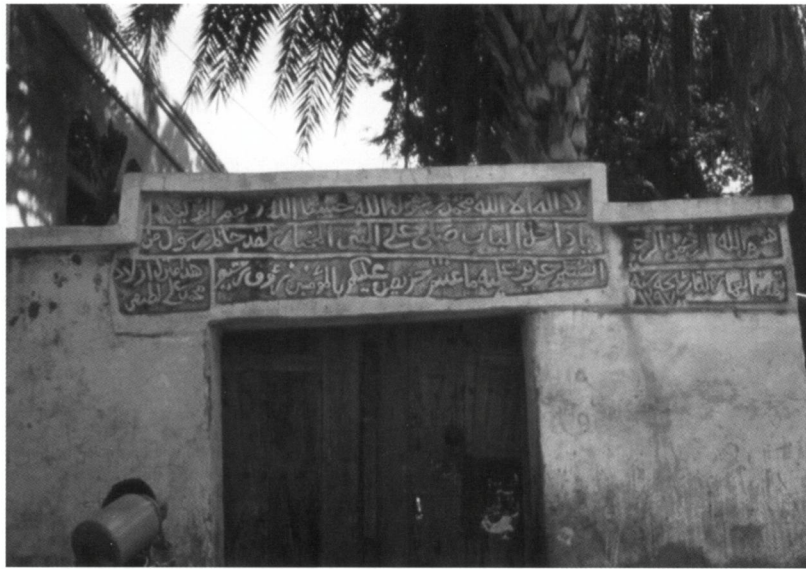


FIGURE 7. *Bayt al-Faqīh*, private house, inscription above the main door (1297/1879). Photograph E. Galdieri, 1997 season.

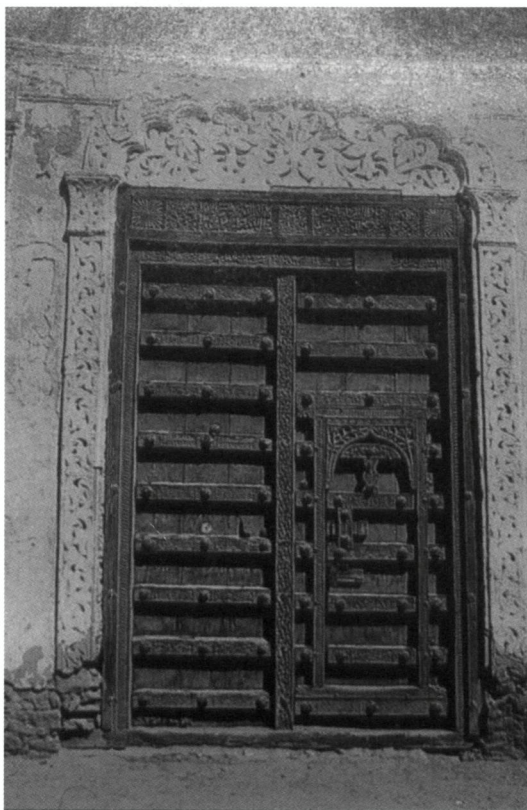


FIGURE 8. *Shihr*, private house, inscription on the wooden lintel. Photograph after Hardy-Guilbert 2001: 83.

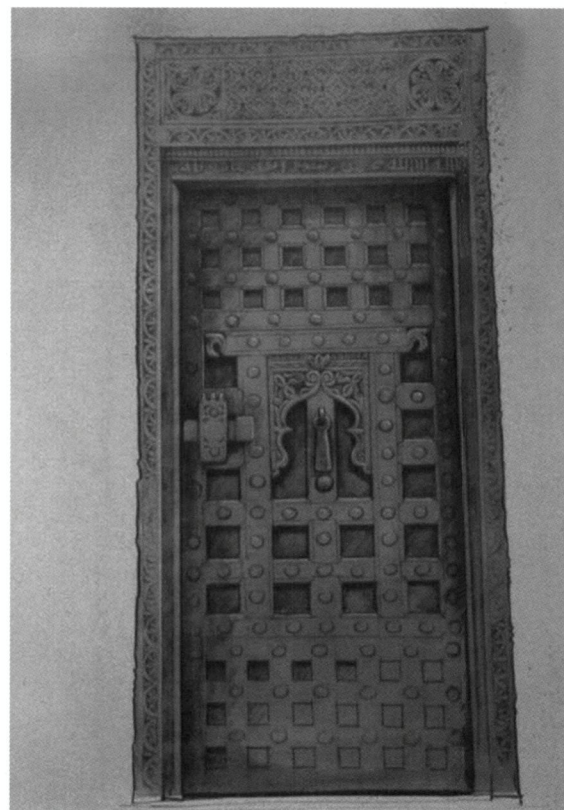


FIGURE 9. *Mukallā*, private house, inscription on the wooden lintel. Drawing after Wöhrlin 1999: pl. 93.



FIGURE 10. *Zanzibar, private house, inscription on the wooden lintel.*
 Photograph after Mwalim 1998: fig. 66, detail.



FIGURE 11. *Hays, private house, inscription above the main door.* Photograph M.V. Fontana, 1999 season.



FIGURE 12. *Bayt al-Faqih, private house, inscription above the main door (1385/1965).* Photograph M.V. Fontana, 1999 season.

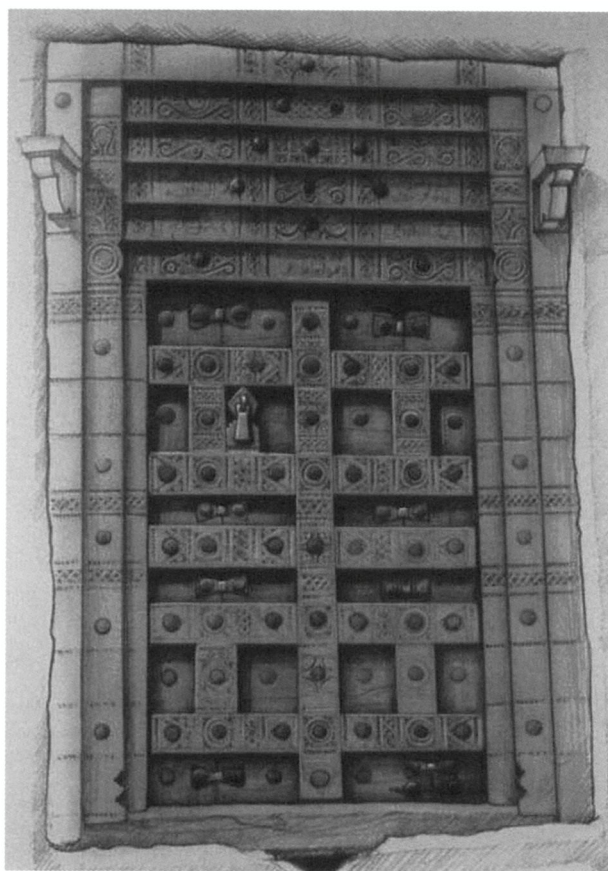


FIGURE 13. *al-Khurraybah, private house, inscription on the wooden lintel. Photograph after Wöhrlin 1999: pl. 97.*



FIGURE 14. *Talismanic bowl in the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, detail. Photograph after Ittig 1982: pl. IIIA.*



FIGURE 15. *al-Luḥayyah, private house, magic square.* Photograph M.V. Fontana, 1999 season.



FIGURE 16. *Bayt al-Faqīh, private house, panel in stucco sculpted on the upper part of the main entrance (1293/1876).* Photograph M.V. Fontana, 1997 season.

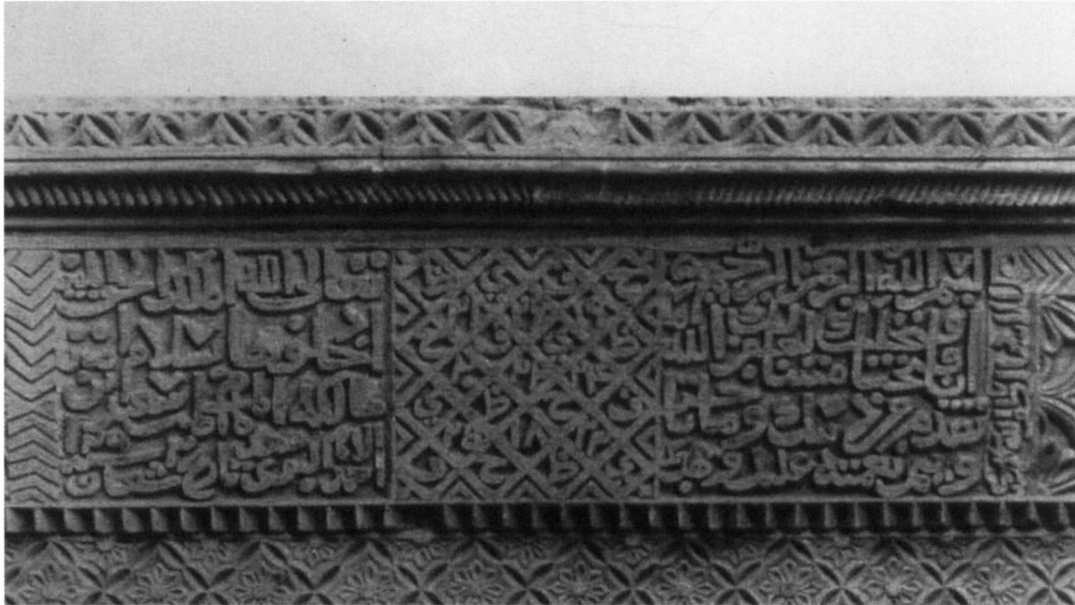


FIGURE 17. *Jammah, palace of al-Manşūr, inscription on the wooden lintel of the main door.*
Photograph after Baldissera 1993: fig. 3.



FIGURE 18. *al-Ghurfah, small mausoleum, wooden coping of one of the four doors.*
Photograph M.V. Fontana, 1994 season.